PERIYAR ON ISLAM

Translated and Introduced

by

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PERIYAR ON ISLAM

E.V. Ramasamy, (1879-1973) affectionately and respectfully known as Periyar (great man/elder), not only among his followers but also among people at large in peninsular India, was an uncompromising iconoclast, a consistent rationalist and an untiring socio-cultural reformer of the previous century.[1] Much of what has been achieved by way of social development, particularly in Tamil Nadu, but also to some extent in South India in general, owes to his ceaseless efforts in the sphere of ideological articulation, elaboration and organisation.[2] While he was alive and active, many who stood to lose in several ways because of his nearly three-quarters of a century-long campaign against the oppressive native religio-cultural practices in general, but the most vicious social irrationality of the Indian society, that is, the system and spirit of caste, in particular, projected him as a rabid atheist of the mould of the nineteenth century West. This they did in order to de-legitimize him with the masses who, it was generally presumed, were inclined towards things godly and religious. After his death, many of his followers, including sympathetic intellectuals, have been doing the same, presumably to enhance his prestige in the currently fashionable universe of discourses. They could do this because, *one*, Periyar was often pressurised to elaborate his own personal views on God, soul and religion; *two*, when he was articulating against the concrete socio-cultural evils that Brahminical Hinduism, the dominant form of religious discourse, has brought about in Indian society, he generally used the terms God and religion without any further qualification. But the truth of the matter is, while alive, Periyar himself, time and again, refuted the 'charge' of being an atheist and disclaimed any intention of negating the existence of God or propagating godlessness.[3]

Periyar's position on these issues is much more complex than what both his admirers as well as his opponents make out to be. It is easy and also fair to demonstrate that personally he did not believe in God, soul or religion and that he was a confirmed agnostic or even an atheist.[4] On occasions he also attempted to elaborate his own version of philosophical atheism, for the benefit of those of his followers who were intellectually and also communistically inclined. But this does not mean that his social mission and public life was devoted mainly or even primarily to God-negation and propagating atheism. He was not out to preach to the

public what he believed or practiced in his personal life, that is, atheism - indiscriminate negation of all historical manifestations and philosophical elaborations of an omnipotent God and eternal soul. In this matter his opponents also exploited the ambiguity inherent in the native term 'nastik', particularly when it is translated as atheist in English. While the former, within the specific socio-cultural tradition of the sub-continent refers to one who denies the authority of the Vedas, the latter on the other hand is broader in connotation and refers to one who denies the existence of God. The anomaly is that in translation the particular becomes the universal. Periyar's target, on the other hand, was specific and contextual - the deleterious and disastrous effect that the dominant 'religion' of his day was having on the social life of the people; this effect, which does not seem to abate even today, is the legitimation through religionising and sacralising, the comprehensive and structural-cultural form of injustice and inhumanity in Indian society. In other words, the system and spirit of caste/varna. This 'social or anti-social religion', not only condemns a vast number of people, whether known as dalits or not, to less than human level of existence but also inhibits the society at large from realising its common goal of comprehensive and egalitarian well-being for all, through increase in economic growth, spread of inclusive fraternity and overall efficiency in modernity.

The debilitating impact that Brahminism as a religious philosophy has come to wield in individual, interpersonal, social, public and political spheres of modern India, ironically had received a tremendous boost under colonialism; for colonialism itself is more accurately understood as a compact between the native-traditional and foreign-modernising elite. Through its various acts of commissions and omissions, the collusive colonial rule resulted in the universalisation, politicisation and naturalisation of the Brahminical-casteist influence and dominance in the sub-continent. Late Professor M.N. Srinivas has noted this fact and commented: 'It is my hunch, that the varna model became more popular during the British period as a result of variety of forces...' (1966:6). More recently, influential historians have confirmed this insight and stated that what has come to be known as Traditional India is indeed only British India.[5]

It is in this broader context of colonially valorised Brahminical religio-cultural philosophy and social practice that Periyar was articulating and elaborating his critique of religion, almost solely in the socio-political sphere. His focus was not God and religion in general or in the philosophical sense but religion in particular - the Brahminical religion - taken in its practical-social dimension of buttressing up social iniquity and inhumanity. Besides, unwholesome social influence was not the

monopoly of Brahminism. All religions, being historical creations, tend to accumulate beliefs and practices that become anachronistic and anti-social. And for this reason Periyar was certainly not an enthusiast of any religion. But his obsession was almost exclusively with the realm of the social and the political. And even here, his battle was against the ascriptive and discriminatory evaluation of human beings, in other words, the system and spirit of caste/varna, being upheld by the so-called religious beliefs and practices. It may be useful to add that such a consideration of religion and the related matters, is in perfect consonance with the classical as well as contemporary traditions of sociology of religion. The dominant stream within this sub-discipline today deals not so much with 'god-experience' of individuals and groups but the comparative influence of different religions on social relations in different societies.[6]

In an important speech on God and religion, Periyar clarifies his stand:

> "The Self-Respect Movement was started with the objective of instilling a sense of self-respect in the people of this country, to bring about equality among all people in society and economy and to unify them. Though it has several other principles, it was not started in order to oppose gods and religions as claimed by our opponents. The Self-Respect Movement really endeavours in transparency, to explain why and how the people of our country had lost their self-pride, to assert that the obstacles in their way should be abolished and indeed to abolish such obstacles. In the course of such efforts, if religions, gods or whatever else comes in the way as obstacles, the Movement will not hesitate to do away with them also.
>
> In this context it is necessary to understand, first, what is it that is being spoken of as religion and what are those beings that are referred to as gods. If it is said that religion is constituted of moral rules for the collective life of the humans then the Self-Respect Movement does not bother much about such religions; on the contrary, if necessary the Movement will even assist them. If again, it is said that religion came into existence to assist the human soul to reach God, the Movement does not care about those religions either; it will leave men of such opinion and religions to their fate at least for the time being. Because such an affair is about men in their individual concern, it could be dealt with later. But if on the other hand, any religion ruins the human-social sense, destroys the feeling of self-dignity among men, divides people by prescribing high and low among them and obstructs common progress and freedom by

damaging social unity, the Self-Respect Movement has indeed been struggling to eradicate it." (*The entire speech is given as* Appendix.)

On another occasion Periyar gave his own idea of religion:

'Generally speaking such entities as are called religions and paths, if taken in a positive sense, are all created for the good of the social life of man. Religions and paths are indeed plans for human life.'

Despite such repeated and unambiguous proclamations, if Periyar was and is being branded and projected as an atheist it is not out of any misunderstanding or in order to carry forward his transformatory and liberative message. On the other hand the intended and unintended consequence of such a critique is to blunt his sharp social criticism, shift it to the domain of the metaphysical and the mystical and thus relegate it to the universe of interminable and unintelligible debates.

Such a strategy has also the unfortunate effect of diluting the issue through unwarranted generalization, thereby neutralizing Periyar's particular thrust against the religio-cultural evils of this country and culture. Periyar is, thus, made to appear as the indiscriminate, crude and insensitive opponent of all believers in God and Transcendence. He is seen as one out to preach godlessness and offend the sensibilities of the faithful by publicly disparaging gods and goddesses. In fact the target of Periyar's socio-political opposition is much narrower and more specific, limited to those social forces represented by the contemporary Brahminised and Brahminical groups (and also religion-mongers everywhere) whose vested interests lay in the preservation, perpetuation and promotion of the pernicious system and spirit of caste/varna and allied forms of exploitation of the masses in the name of God and religion. These groups were ruthlessly drawing upon certain selective traditional-religious concepts, in order to buttress their claim to ascriptive superiority. It was they and their social philosophy that emerged during the colonial period as the Hindus and their religion as Hinduism. Professor Romila Thapar has convincingly argued this fact in her celebrated essay titled, "*Imagined Religious Communities*".

The Brahminical groups, in order to cover up their naked isolation, as well as to ward off their becoming the sole and sharp target of all democratic social forces, were constrained to camouflage themselves as Hindus and their religion as Hinduism. So, whenever Periyar spoke critically and even condemningly of Hinduism and the Hindu Society he was, without question, referring to the Brahminical social philosophy of discriminatory ascriptive evaluation of social groups and the society in

which such a philosophy and the forces representing it have been accepted as socio-religiously legitimate, leading to enormous social and human waste. His target was those humanly constructed gods who were projected as providing legitimacy and justification for the inhuman social practice of caste. And this problem being the primary and pervasive, in public speeches, Periyar tended to use the terms 'gods' and 'religion' without any further qualification but meaning always the concrete and contextual, that is Brahminical. It was from specific and concrete anti-Brahminical, that is, religion-legitimated casteism, as the dominant and prominent social reality of the day, that Periyar was escalating his critique of god and religion in general. It is clear, beyond question, that his trajectory is the negative impact that religions in general and the Brahminic religion in particular, have on social relations. The social critique in him far exceeds the occasional philosophical and, the particular overwhelms the general. Note that whenever, or at least on most occasions, Periyar spoke on god and religion, it was briskly followed by a lengthy discourse either on caste and its evils, specifically or at least the religio-social scenario of what has come to be known as Hinduism (see Appendix).

That this indeed is so, is confirmed by another of his contra-popular insight that all religions are neither equal nor same. For Periyar, as for all the great socio-political reformers of the twentieth century, including Ambedkar, all religions are not the same: their value and worth vary according to the extent to which they are capable of and are in practice absorbing and representing the contemporary universal-humanist values of egalitarianism, justice and brotherhood of all men, in other words the very principles of Enlightenment and modernity. Further, their liberative value varies according to the direction of change they undergo in modernity, which signalled mass emergence in subjectivity; and such a direction normally has been from the transcendental-spiritual to the immanent-moral, the anachronistic-exploitative to the rational-liberative and also sectarian-exclusive to universal-inclusive. Additional characteristics, of modernised religions, according to these thinkers are that they become 'achieved' in the sense of being freely and consciously chosen from being ascriptive or hereditary and also interiorised or personalised instead of remaining 'communal' and in a sense external. Ambedkar has commented: 'Time has arrived when religion should no longer be inherited from father to son like goods and chattels, but should be examined rationally by everybody before personal acceptance' (2003:403). In the concrete case of modern India two contrary religio-ideological movements came to dominate the scenario representing changes in religion in the wake of modernity. The caste-oppressed groups, though from a position of

subalternity, emerged everywhere pushing for democratisation of the hitherto traditional-hierarchical religion and also fashioning for themselves either totally or partially new 'sacred canopies.' The attempt here was to transform religion into an emancipatory human experience in the predominantly motivational spheres of the personal and the social. On the other hand, the caste-perpetuating groups, working from a position of dominance, were engaged in the process of fundamentalisation and communalisation of religion primarily in the political sphere of the public.[7] The prolific, ideological outpourings on the questions of god and religion during the colonial period need to be viewed within such a contestatious and acrimonious social scenario.

Periyar as an ideologue of the generally caste-oppressed social groups, viewed and evaluated all religions from such an articulated or unconsciously expected moral-emancipatory framework; and he naturally found that all the organised and organising religion of the day were falling short of the ideal, and wanting in some respect or other. Accordingly, he was wary of them all in a general sense. Added to this, he personally did believe that any emphasis on a transcendent deity tended to a corresponding depressing and de-strengthening of the human endeavour and worth. But he certainly did not allow this personal conviction of his to cloud his primary social mission of abolition of ascriptive discrimination in social relations. Such a differentiated stand enabled him to note and to understand the implications of differences between religions and contemporary socio-religious processes.

Differences between religions in terms of their impact on social relations, according to Periyar, became crucial when viewed in the context of abolition or perpetuation of ascriptive discrimination or caste/varna. The crucial test is whether a given religion is for or against such a social discrimination; or at least does it have the ideological potential for negation of the pervasive social irrationality of the sub-continent. Comparisons could be odious and in the highly volatile situation of modern India, could be twisted to read as provocation. But Periyar was not one to back out in articulating the socially relevant truth especially when such an articulation could lead the caste-oppressed millions to spiritual emancipation and socio-economic empowerment. And significant that Periyar's challenge, so too Ambedkar's, has not been taken up, leave alone responded to, by the elite of this country. All they could do is to pretend that such a challenge does not exist; when such a pretension does not work, the thrust of the argument is distorted as hinted above.

Viewed from the standpoint of the abolition of unjust ascriptive discrimination, Periyar found that Islam, Buddhism and Christianity have

a high ideological potential for, and much affinity to, the rational and emancipatory agenda of modernity than what had come to be known under the colonial aegis as Hindu religion. The latter, as experienced by Periyar, was nothing but the Brahminical social power structure camouflaged as Hindu religion through colonial intervention. Through untouchability, caste and varna, the colonially constructed and nationalistic-politically articulated Hinduism forms a continuity. It is a selectively, and hence distortingly, assembled cultural politics from out of a vast and unevenly developed religious and cultural traditions of the sub-continent. But thanks mainly to the British whose policies unilaterally empowered the Brahminical and the Brahminised at the expense of all other groups, such a pre-modern social power structure came to be successfully installed, projected and imposed on the masses as the Hindu religion.[8] Periyar and numerous other contemporary social reformers, time and again, raised the question, 'Is this a religion?' From the standpoint of what is commonly expected of a religion, the Brahminical inscriptions and prescriptions offered as 'Hinduism' appeared awfully anachronistic and exploitative of the common man. The entire project and process of liberative modernity was, and still continues to be, seen as hostage to this colonially constructed and sectarian cultural politics. For the majority of the 'Hindus', thus caught up in a religiously legitimated, hence comprehensive social bondage, emancipation inevitably and even primarily meant liberation from the age-old socio-religious bondage. If the multifaceted liability and disability of the numerous toiling castes are vortexed within the religio-social spectrum of untouchability-caste-varna-Hinduism, and in the existential context of the entrenched castes unwilling to relent, then conversion to another religion became a serious and pressing option. It is in this context that the ideologues of Indian social renaissance, beginning with Jothiba Phule, urged religio-cultural mobility or at least an inclusive and humane restatement of religion.

Even within the traditional and dominant consideration of 'Indian renaissance', the ideological potential of fostering social egalitarianism and thereby promoting social harmony in the place of a caste-rigid and divisive society, of other religions, but Islam in particular, was well recognised. For example, Bipin Chandra Pal observed,

> "It was the Mohammedans who gave us a right, a political right, apart from, and independent of, our status as members of particular castes and communities. There lies the foundation of democracy, there lies the foundation of real national life, there lies the foundation of true civic equality" (B.N. Ganguli, 1975:61).

And again, the neo-Hindu ideologue Vivekananda commented,

> "If ever the followers of any religion approached equality in any appreciable degree on the plane of practical work-a-day life, it is those of Islam and Islam alone." (Ibid p.120)[9]

Periyar's critique and comparison of Hinduism, gods and religion in general, as well as his advice of religious migration away from it, need to be considered against such a tradition of positive evaluation of Islam.[10]

The following five speeches deal specifically with Islam and they were mostly delivered at different places and subsequently published in the journal *Kudiarasu* of which Periyar was the editor. The first one was delivered at Erode, the home town of Periyar in October,1929. The second speech was delivered at Trichirapalli on 18 March 1947 when the Dravidian employees of the South Indian Railways, presented Periyar with a cash-bundle of Rs. 1080/- for the *Dravidar Kazhagham* and also a memorandum stating facts and circumstances of discriminatory and contemptuous treatment meted out to them by the Brahmin officers of the Company. Accepting the cash contribution, Periyar in his public response treated at length the trade union dimension of the problem in the first portion of his speech (this portion is omitted here); in the second part of the speech, he put forward his controversial proposal of conversion to Islam as the antidote to the despicable status of Shudras and ati-Shudras within the caste system of the Hindu religion. Such a proposal triggered off a series of objections among his followers. The third and the fourth pieces are specific responses of the author to such objections. These three speeches were also printed together as a pamphlet under the title: *Islam is the Effective Antidote for the Ethnic Degradation (of the Dravidians)*. The fifth one is a speech delivered by Periyar on the occasion of the birthday celebration of Prophet Mohammad Nabi. All the speeches treat Islam in the context of its egalitarian potential for humanising the lives of the caste-oppressed masses.

Periyar was a people's intellectual par excellence. He was forever addressing, debating and negotiating with the larger common masses that thronged in great numbers to his numerous public meetings. These people who were often semi-literate or even illiterate, though under the thraldom of Brahminical Hinduism, found deep resonance in whatever he was expounding. Periyar addressed them in a language and idiom understandable by the common man. The style of his address was eminently suited to the purpose on hand, that is conveying the increasingly complex socio-political reality, to people who gathered in public squares, perhaps for the first time, in order to make a conscious and significant decision in their lives. This fact needs to be remembered while reading Periyar even in translation.

1. The Untouchables in Crowds should become Muslims

Comrades, 69 Adi-Dravidas have become Muslims. I am pleased not because all their sins are forgiven, or that the heavens are now within their reach, or that they have now become identical with God. I do not accept any of these, nor do I advise others to accept them. Besides I do not agree that merely on account of a man's religious conversion his beliefs and behaviour would be rewarded differentially.

It is only superstition to believe that on account of religion, that if a Hindu consumes cow's meat, it is sin and if a Mohammedan does, it is no sin; both the beliefs have no meaning. All religions of the world are raised on superstition. Therefore I am pleased, not on the basis of sin and virtue or heaven and hell.

If you ask me what else is the reason, it is because the 69 Adi-Dravidas, said to have converted from what is called the Hindu religion, have been freed from their ascriptive degradation; and also that they are liberated, to some extent, from an animal stage of idiocy and uncivilisation and also from ignorance. I am pleased for this reason.

That is, as far as the above-mentioned 69 persons are concerned untouchability is gone. Hereafter no one can degradingly call them, Paraiah, Chakkili or Chandal. They too need not any more stand at a distance, considering others as swami; they do not have to fall at their feet and worship them; they do not have to live outside the village; and they do not have to be harassed anymore with no water to drink or bathe.

With no services of the washer men and barbers, they do not any more have to go about living in dirty clothes, bear-like long hair, an unseemly sight for the onlookers. Hereinafter they could walk about in all the public streets; go for any sort of employment; compete with anybody; participate in politics. Even with regard to religion they now have the right to enter their temples without any hesitation and to read the Vedas.

Therefore, when I think of the fact that they somehow have been freed from economic difficulties, social degradation, lack of self-respect and political marginalisation, I cannot but be pleased. Because, my passionate desire, that unendurable cruelties in the name of religion, Vedic Shashtras and gods, such as untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability, all should be rooted out, gives me these thoughts.

Therefore, my humble and honest view is this: in our country, those who are of the opinion that, cruelties such as untouchability should go, social harmony must be established, people should be instilled with self-respect, most importantly, not oppose the untouchables becoming Mohammedans.

Some have written to me objecting that the Mohammedan religion

engenders violent nature. I am of the opinion, that if this is true, then that itself is a good reason for recommending Islam to the Untouchables in order to abolish their untouchability. If it is true that Islam gives birth to violent tendencies, won't it be that those who have joined it, at least hereinafter not behave so slavishly? And again, won't it be that others considering their violent nature would, out of fear, likely to be respectful towards them?

The character of the Mohammedans, if it cannot be termed as violent, has to be viewed as unbeatable boldness that would not easily submit to humiliation and degradation. If those who are considered Untouchables today manage to acquire such a nature, that could even be sufficient and there is no need for conversion. However, as long as they remain Hindus, such a character cannot easily be acquired and I would also say that those who are said to be of upper castes would not allow the Untouchables to become so courageous.

Therefore, until the Hindu society achieves true equality and unity, there is no way out for the Untouchables other than becoming Muslims in crowds. On this count, we are not in a position to raise any objection in the matter. Besides, those who are concerned either with religion or Hindu society, if they have any problem in this, could easily come forward to remove the cruelties and degradation endured by the Untouchables. I am always willing to cooperate with them also.

2. Islam is the Effective Antidote for the Ethnic Degradation (of the Dravidians)

Colleagues, our malady, the malady of being Shudras and bastards is a serious, indeed a very serious one. It is like cancer and leprosy, a long-standing malady. It has only one remedy and that remedy is Islam. Apart from this there is no remedy. If not this, one has only to endure the misery. Through other sleep-inducing and soporific drugs one could get rid of the pain but would continue to move about like a stinking corpse. On the other hand, in today's context, if one wants to get well and go about one's business, then Islam, which means, giving up of Hinduism, is the medicine. That alone would give you well being, make you walk upright and is a source of courage.

Do not think that Islam means the religion of Mohammed Nabi, or of those wearing *lungi* and keeping measured beard, or of those known as *Sayabu, Rowthar, Marakkayar and Mappillas*.[11] The religion of the Dravidians is anterior to that of Mohammed Nabi, Christ and the Buddha, but also of Krishnan, Raman and Vishnu of the Aryas. Islam is the Arabic term for peace, humility and dedication. Islam means brotherhood, and that is all. Look up the dictionaries of a hundred or two hundred years

old. I would say, that if instead of saying it in Arabic, the same is said in Tamil, it is a religion having the characteristics of one God, worship of a formless God and peace, unity, mutual humility, devotion and fraternity. *Kadavul* is Dravidian, God, English and Allah, Arabic; and it is not a God or principle alien to the Dravidians. Just like recognizing other religions by the smear of ash or vertical lines on the forehead or tuft of hair at the top of head, do not judge Islam by shaved head, beard or *lungi*. The Muslims of this country are not the sole proprietors of Islam. The Mappillas of Malayalam are another. The Egyptians are yet another. The Islamic peoples of Germany and Japan are also other members. So also are the African, Negro and Abyssinian Muslims. For all these there is only one God and that too without a form, having no wife and children and demanding neither food nor drinks. What is common to all are fraternity, equal rights and discipline and all the rest depends on the traditions of the different countries. Precisely because of these common elements, the sixty crore peoples, though living in different parts of the world are fraternal among themselves. The world is in fear of them. If you say you are a Hindu, what is common to all the fifteen crores of the peoples? Where is dignity? Where is fraternity? Where is unity? Where is humane discipline? Why get merely provoked and angry?

Dr. Ambedkar, though he is successful now, when his enthusiasm dies down, if he calls himself Hindu again, he would certainly be added once again to the list of the Panchamas.[12] Better than transforming this country into a Hindu country, Hindustan, what is wrong in changing it into Dravidastan, or if the Brahmins could not tolerate this name, into Pakistan, a different name but embodying the same Dravidian ideology?

People cannot live without a religion. That is, the kind of religion I am talking about is not the one that establishes a relationship between god and men or awards fate, forgiveness or reward in the upper world of heaven. It is of the other kind, of humble respect, love and devotion, and peaceful, fraternal, united, disciplined and mutually helpful life between man and man. It is for your understanding, that I am using the term religion with which you are accustomed. My own preference is to call this a social principle. But I do not object if you want to call this, religion. Without such a 'religion' it is hardly possible for men to live in society. Therefore, along with the ten crores of people who are already living united in the name of such a principle, at least another two and a half crores of Tamils, of the four crore Dravidians joining, and together if the twelve and a half crore people live unified on a single principle, achieving dignity, abolishing degradation and with humane rights, I demand to know who loses what? Or what is the great loss?

Or let some one suggest an alternative remedy to this Brahminical abomination, I am willing to listen. If we in the Dravida Nadu become Islamic, then that Islam would be what we determine it to be and not according to the sweet will of some *Sayabu* or Mulla. I know the Islamic practice of this ten crore of Muslims. A country's preference is its majority's preference, unlike in the case of Hindu religion in which a handful of Brahmins dictate to the overwhelming majority, saying, "Keep your distance, you cannot be educated, you are a Shudra, you are a bastard, you cannot claim equal rights, employment or representation". Islam is not like that; on the other hand, it is a way of life, humility, peace and true fraternity. Despite whatever else, it is a path characterised by unity and discipline and this no one could deny.

I am not an agent of Islam nor do I preach Islam. This is the truth, the real truth. I do not have any uncommon attachment and friendship for, confidence in, or co-operation with the Muslims more than you all do. But in order to kill the devilish, dangerous and cruel snake of Brahminism and Hinduism or at least to escape from the effect of its poison, this is the antidote.[13] Those desirous of learning properly about Islam should go and find out in England, Egypt and Turkey.

The *swarajiyam* that is approaching is going to be a great disaster for us. While about 75 of the 100 Dravidians continue to live like Hanumans and Vibhishnans, others like comrade Avinasilingam and certain others, the so-called Pundits and Sirs, attaching belled-tails to themselves, singing Ram bhajans, that is Arya bhajans and following the Aryans, seek to crush us.[14] What a shameful thing it is. In my country, in the rule that is being carried on with my tax-money, and on my behalf, if I do not have representation, proportionate employment and human dignity, and to get these I have to petition the Aryans, fall and worship them and beg and dance before him, I demand to know, is this self-respect? If some handful of traitors calls itself as Brahmin slaves, that is Hindus, should we also call ourselves Hindus, that is, servants, serfs, dogs and slaves? I demand to know this. For the removal of degradation the magic word is Islam, that is, 'I am not a Hindu', and this alone can make us human beings. I am not saying this today or yesterday. Right from 1919, 1920 until today for twenty-eight years I have been saying this and I have not lost my popularity. The main reason for this being, there is no other remedy for the removal of this degradation. In the attempt to cure this malady, the medicines of all great doctors have only failed.

The *Sayabus* and the scheduled castes having obtained their proportionate employments, if the rest is left to the monopolistic enjoyment of the Brahmins, what is your fate - the Dravidian or the

Tamil, who is neither Brahmin, nor Muslim, Christian or Adi-Dravidar (scheduled caste), in other words, the Shudra, think of it. In the State Legislative Assembly where is your representative? The Scheduled Castes, Brahmins, the profiteering businessmen and the tyrant Sancaracharya, all of them have representatives. Think, where is the representative for the Dravidian, who is perplexed, 'Why am I a Shudra?' Think with self-respect. Employment alone is not our goal. Our degradation should go. We should become a society that has no Vibhishnan.

My dear Dravidian brother, tell me of a remedy other than Islam for this. You do not have to tell right now. Go home; consult Tamil savants, Sirs, Pundits, advocates who have become so, having learnt English, and other big officers. Discuss in anxiety and sensitivity, take a decision and tell me tomorrow. For all of you who have listened so far, patiently without pelting stones at me or creating troubles, one hundred Islam!

3. Why should one join Islam?

Colleagues, Among the many people who heard my speech in Trichy on 18-3-47 and also those who read the editorial in *Kudiarasu*, some ten, fifteen of them have written to me and to the editor, some hesitantly, others pityingly, yet others censoringly, condemningly, threateningly and even with fearfulness but all at length. Some others came up directly and conducted a war of argumentation. By way of assuring all of them and also to inform others of the assurance I gave to those who met me directly, I am writing this. Without getting excited or provoked and with no religious bias, do think about this. That only on account of our animosity towards a religion, we tend to hate the followers of that religion also.

The reason behind the hatred of the Hindus towards the Muslims today is their hatred of Islam itself. Because Islam is contrary to the Aryan religion (Hinduism), the Hindus (the Aryans) hate Islam. It is contrary because Islam demolishes the very foundation of the Hindu religion. For the Aryan religion, which is also called Hindu religion, there are so many gods having also as many forms. And among the people there are several caste discriminations. The caste has been devised according to circumstances of birth. The people are divided into higher and lower castes such as Brahman, Shudra and Panchama (Pariah). It is in accordance with this principle that we have become members of low caste.

In Islam on the other hand, there is no Brahman (high caste) or Shudra (low caste) or Panchaman (least caste). In other words, Islam is founded on the principle of one God and one caste, that is, one family and one divinity. It could also be said that such a principle belongs to and needed for the Dravidians. The so-called Hindu (Aryan) religion is based on many gods and many castes, which are also created by the gods. Through

this arrangement of many gods - many castes, the Aryans (the Brahmins) get good benefits and privileges. The Dravidians on the other hand, find only ruin, degradation and obstacle to human rights. It is for this reason the Islamic principle is very odious to the Brahmins.[15] For the Dravidians on the contrary, Islam is opportune for the removal of degradation and achievement of welfare. Therefore the Brahmins, the Aryans are constrained to hate Islam.

If all people follow Islam there would not be a caste or community called the Brahmin; the many gods as well as the idol-gods also won't be there; the revenue from offerings to these idol-gods also would cease. It is on account of this, that Islam is hated by the Aryans. It has been so hated now for quite a long time, and accusing the Muslims of various things, the mass of people also is being induced to nurture the same feelings of hatred towards Islam. In this way, since Islam is hated, the Muslims are also hated by the Aryans and it has been so devised that the slaves of the Aryan religion, the Shudras (Dravidians) too, hate them. Therefore I say, because of the Aryan hatred of Islam, the Dravidian Hindus also are habituated to hate the Muslims. The others, such as the Christian, Sikh and Buddhist religions and Arya and Brahma Samajams are not hated in the same manner as Islam is. Because the Christian and Sikh religions being to some extent antagonistic to Islam, these three, the Hindu, Sikh and the Christian as its common opponents try to live as far as possible in peace among themselves. Several Brahmins too have embraced the Christian religion. Several others are employees in Christian institutions. Any Hindu who so embraces the Christian religion here is permitted to hold on to the caste principle. The Sikh also worships God more or less in the same Hindu manner. But instead of the idol-god he keeps the book in the place of God and worships in the manner of a Hindu. The Sikhs too, like the Hindu, though not to the same extent observe caste divisions. Among the Sikhs also there is a group of people considered and forced to be untouchable and low class. Proportionate class representative right also has been granted to the Sikhs. There also has been struggle for separate electorate among them. But the Aryan newspapers cover it up from being known. This information I got directly when I had been to Punjab.

Among the Christians of this country also, there are untouchables. Some of them, having been educated are given teachers' posts. But that is it. Otherwise, be it among the Christians or among the Hindus, they have not been given equal rights as in Islam. Therefore the Aryans are friendly with the Christian and Sikh religionists. Buddhism and Jainism also in practice at least, being antagonistic to Islam and having outwardly relations with the Hindus, the Aryans are not so much inimical towards them.

Therefore, as the Brahmins on account of their selfishness and casteism hate Islam, the Muslims are also, out of superstition, hated by the Aryan-Brahminic slaves. Even today, can any one tell, that for the Hindu ideologues, besides making people hate the Muslims, what is the core philosophy, principle and practice of the Hindu religious preaching? Who created Islam? What else is it, if not created by another reformer such as the Buddha and the Christ. Why was Islam created? It was in order to abolish multiple gods, idol-gods and ascriptive discriminations among people and to create one God and one society (caste), in order to abolish superstitions and idol-worship and bring (people) closer to rationality.

We have no objection, just as it is called the Arab religion or the Turkish religion, if Islam is also called Dravidian or the Dravidar religion. Whatever be the method, the people should move away from caste discrimination, birth-related superiority-inferiority, polytheism and idol-worship. The Dravidians should realize that we have said this with no intention other than that they should be redeemed from their present state of slavery to the Brahmins, a state in which they are unable to raise their head.

It is not clear to us what shame is involved for the Dravidian, who is devoted and friendly to the Brahmin, putting on a guise and acting like him, but has basically consented to remain a Shudra, to transfer the same devotion, friendliness, guise and behaviour to the Muslims and become a non-Shudra and continue to remain also a Dravidian. We are either ashamed or hate to live in brotherly relations in freedom and dignity with the ten percent of the people but instead have consented to lead a degraded life with the three percent, feigning as though we belong here, in bondage and indignity with people who, being different from us treat us contemptuously. The reason for this is, that the Brahmin has made us all enemies of Islam by projecting it as devilish, satanic and monstrous. Can any other reason be advanced? What is the bad practice in Islam that is not among us? Which reform or good effort that we want to undertake and Islam prevents?

If the doctor advises to amputate a hand in order to save life we agree to it; if he says, 'you will not live unless your leg is cut off,' we agree; if another hole is to be made for defecation, we accept and abide by it; if uterus is to be removed, we also consent to it; if any other important part of the body needs to be removed in order to save life we do not hesitate to do so. This being so, if we point out that a dishonest horde, having conquered, enslaved and made us accept through force and fraud a philosophy-like principle, that we are inferior to them, and keeps us in a degraded status, and that-this needs to be abolished, why so much of reluctance, opposition, hesitation and fearfulness? When then

and how else this degradation is to go, I demand to know. Those who are angry with me, if they are so without suggesting an alternative to this, won't the learned conclude that they are mere fanatics?

Indignant comrades! The Shudra-label will not go by merely consigning the Vedas, Shastras, Puranas and Ithihasas to fire. It will not again go by demolishing temples and breaking up idols. The Brahmin knows how to turn all these to his own advantage just as the way *dosa* is turned on the pan. The Shudra-tag will not go by merely calling oneself Dravidian. In today's context, it will not go even if you declare that you are not a Hindu. The Hindu religion will not disappear lightly. It is like a chameleon that won't die easily. To kill it, our own life span, why the life span of our grandchildren also is not enough. So what is possible within our own lifetime is, to move away from the Hindu religion. If we do so move away, in today's context, we need a name to declare who we are and that is to be created new; that also needs to be propagated; and the Gandhian government has to be made to accept it; legal sanction, tradition and influence have to accrue to it; representative right needs to be determined and made legitimate. Are all these easily achieved in the teeth of Brahminic trickery and opposition, which has the support of the Bania also? Could this even be thought of in our vegetative society? Think of this. Instead of all these hassles, and without being subjected to these obstacles and impossibilities, what is wrong or the difficulty in declaring that I have embraced a religion, a religion which has already achieved influence and currency, that has been established and accepted by all thinking persons and which genuinely and rightfully embodies our own philosophy and religion of social egalitarianism? Think on this also.

Why such bitterness and anger at the mention of Islam? Be first clarified as to why such sweetness and satisfaction at the mention of Hindu. In the alternative, suggest a way to abolish in your own lifetime the contemptible Shudra-tag. I have stated my thoughts; you state yours. Wasting time in endless argument and counter-argument and useless gossips, are we to die and leave our progeny also as Shudra? If we so die, it will only profit the Brahmin, for our progeny would offer him holy dates and worship him as divinity; and he would see to it that such a process would not end soon; instead he would bring about dissensions and riots among us. Therefore think, and please do so deeply and in anxiety. Moving away from the fanaticism of attachment to the Aryan religion, think from the position of attachment to self-respect; do not get provoked. If the issue is left without any thoughtful conclusion, Islam and Hinduism and the people of both the religions will clash in which the loss, beatings and death all are for the Dravidians only. The Brahmin not only will not lose anything, but there is

income in it for him, in the court of this world, fees and bribe and in that of the next, holy dates and other orthodox rituals. Through what else except these the Aryans today are living and maintaining themselves in such high status on the one hand, and on the other, have degraded us devising laws and Shasthras, which condemn us as his slaves, progeny of his concubines. Therefore think once again.

4. I am Ashamed of Remaining a Shudra

[Response of Periyar to a letter concerning his lectures in Trichy and Kumbakonam on the topic, ***Islam is the antidote for the ethnic degradation (of the Dravidians).]***

Friend, I saw your letter dated 26-3-47. Forgive me for not mentioning your name and place in this response. I do not care for or feel sorry about your scurrilous words. I am not afraid of Brahminism. I am only ashamed that even today Brahminism has not only kept me tied down and enslaved but also made me a Shudra. I only request you, that in case you also are desirous of not carrying on with the Shudra-tag, to feel ashamed.

Those who have died in Naokali, Bengal, and Punjab and in other places of North India are all same to us. The non-Muslims of those places are not overly ashamed of their Shudra-title. What could we do by feeling sorry for them? It is not that bad at all to die in the course of efforts to abolish the Shudra-tag than to live by merely multiplying one's progeny as Shudra. It is not a big loss either, if by becoming a victim of death one could deny space for the Shudra-tag.

Whom do I advise to join Islam? I am advising only those who hate the Shudra-tag and those who say that the Dravidian society should have self-respect and human feeling, that according to one's own choice, leaving the Hindu religion, one could embrace Islam or any other religion similar to Islam. Therefore the others need not be perturbed. If there is any alternative method please go ahead and demonstrate. Do not blame, stop or harass, those who are making efforts according to their own understanding of the situation by your expansive *veranda Vedanta* (armchair philosophy).

What is shameful about becoming a Muslim? To whom would you become enslaved by so doing? Who could degrade you if you become a Muslim? Who indeed are those ten of the twelve crore Muslims of India? Who are the forty or fifty of the about fifty or sixty lakhs of the Muslims of the Chennai Province? Aren't they those who were once Hindus and the Dravidians? Muslims of such origin, to whom are they slaves now? Where and what of, are they ashamed? Tell us and show us! Whether educated as per the government's requirement or not, they have received more than proportionate employment; whether been to jail or not they have achieved more than proportionate freedom in the

Swarajiyam, and proportionate representation through separate electorate.[16] Having gained equal share among the High Court judges, members of Legislative Assemblies and proportionate share in even small committees, they lead a life of equality.

Oh, Dravidians and Adi-Dravidians! What is your fate? For this degenerate status of yours, what else is the reason except the fact that you are Hindus? Therefore, instead of being ashamed and pained for remaining such a Hindu and instead of thinking on how your own life could be utilized to remove such degradation, you are turning and questioning me, 'Aren't you ashamed?' Is it Fair? You write to me letters threatening that my suggestion to become Muslim has turned the youth against me. The mind of today's youth will not turn against me and even if it so does, I am not afraid of that. The youth of future will praise me. Even if they do not praise me, they will, following what I say today, lead a life of courage and dignity. Whether right or wrong, since I am firm in my resolve, whatever is the consequence, even if it is death, I will endure and die without any complaint but with full mental satisfaction. This I declare truthfully. When Mohammad Nabi preached Islam in the beginning, people of those times also opposed him. And so were the Buddha and the Christ, hated by their contemporaries. That being so, it is but natural that when I, an ordinary, a very ordinary man, preach the same, people hate me too.

But today, on the contrary, Gandhi, hated by none but through massive publicity known as the India's Mahatma, Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, hailed everywhere as the heroic and noble soul, who has reached the top post of the Indian government both through legal procedure as well as by the great assembly of the Congress, and Rajagopalacharyar, the intellectual who having given up many good things of life is really labouring in public life in never-ceasing mental anxiety, all these men are celebrated by people now; but tomorrow or after several years when they will be no more, what else would they leave behind except their own autobiographies in order to point out their achievement particularly on your behalf? Despite having such recognition, support and comforts what has been their endeavour to remove your degradation by circumstances of birth? What is their distinctiveness apart from the fact that as long as they lived they protected 'tradition'? Isn't this all mere publicity? Won't it all be also consumed along with them in the cremation ground?

Raja Sir Annamalai has ten crores of rupees, Birla, forty crores, the Sultan of Hyderabad four hundred crores; Gandhi has publicity across the world and the Acharyar is known as the intellectual all over India; except for such fame and name what particular respect do they command? In the same way you think about your Hindu religion also. With the

departure of the white man, what has changed for you? The actual debasement and the stumbling blocks, have they disappeared? Consider the Muslims, at the departure of the white man, they got Pakistan, but for you there is only Shudrasthan! Therefore, if you listen to me, how much you stand to benefit, what greatness for your progeny and how much satisfaction for me!

The Hindus forever blame the Muslims and spread the poisonous propaganda that many Hindus were forcefully converted to Islam. Am I forcing you? What else is the meaning of this, except that the Aryans and their mercenaries are preventing by force those who are changing their religion? What force do I use in this? I beg of you, think before you come to a conclusion. There is no force involved here. I have no power to employ force. Has there been any complaint from the ten crores of Muslims, from even a single one of them, a hue and cry to the effect that he has been ruined through forceful conversion to Islam? Or has there been any Muslim apart from Gandhi's son, Abdulla Gandhi, who on his own initiative became a Hindu? Even of him it was said then, that he took money (out of greed) and became a Hindu again.

In today's Swarajya government, there is no base for you, Dravidians. In the Constituent Assembly, for you, that is, those Dravidians who have rejected the Shudra-tag, there is none to raise any question on your behalf. In the Conference of Asian League, they are not even aware of the very existence of your community.[17] In such a context, why at the mention of Islam, agitate like a bull that has seen red, why such anxiety, excitement and misery? Comrade Gandhi asserts that the Koran and the Gita are the same; that the names of Rahim and Allah refer only to Ram. He also says, 'I forever am singing of Ram-Rahim. And while dying also I will be uttering the names of Ram-Rahim'. He further says, 'Unless I so utter the names of Ram-Rahim, considering them as same, how can I show my face to the Hindus of Naokali and Muslims of Bihar'. (These are reported in *Dinamani* dated 5-4-47). When things are being so, that is, for such a small matter of having to save face and buy temporary peace, the leader of the Congress himself preaches (unity of Hinduism and Islam). I demand to know why people to whom it is of no concern get provoked when I suggest, to only those who are concerned with their self-respect and averse to their present debased status, that they should take to Islam, which merely means one God, one caste and fraternal feeling, and that too, for such a serious and sincere matter of abolishing the pervasive debasement, achievement of self-respect and human greatness and actualising along with the several crores of people, fraternal feeling, permanent peace, equality, equal rights and freedom.

Until recently, I have been preaching now for a period of about twenty years that those who are desirous of removing untouchability and the status of untouchables, ought to become Muslims and I made those communities also accept the idea. In Kerala (Travancore and Cochin) too, from 1924 to 1925 I preached among the Malayali Ezhavas and the other so-called untouchables and made them accept this. Having agreed to this and passing resolutions to that effect in their conferences, about a total of 2000 or 3000 people here and about 600 or 700 in Kerala have embraced Islam; and since then their degenerate status gradually being removed, rights being granted, the situation is successful, nearing even to the solution of their problem. The right to enter temples in Trivandrum and the right to proportionate representation in Cochin came about due to what, Islam or Hindu dharam?

Yesterday, in Chennai Assembly when Doctor Rajan, a Brahmin proposed the Temple Entry Bill, how did he introduce it? "I propose this Temple Entry Bill so that the Hindu society may not day by day decreasing, be weakened (in other words in order to protect the Hindu religion)". He did not so propose, so that people could get the vision, grace or gift of god and reach the heavens or that they could get their sins forgiven and get to the heavens faster. What is the meaning of this? Isn't it a conspiracy to keep the Dravidians permanently as the Shudras? I ask, shouldn't these dull heads who get provoked and excited, know this? I am suggesting this idea to only those who consider their Shudra-tag as a debasement and not to those who aren't concerned about it. Even for those who are so concerned about their degenerate status I have suggested this plan, only after having asked them for any other alternative, and certainly not out of self-pride or on impulse. Therefore I request those comrades who have been provoked and written letters to me and those who instead of so writing, go about slandering me and spread poisonous propaganda in small groups, to ponder over and consider the matter.

5. A Celebration for Mohammad Nabi

(Public lecture at Chennai on 20-12-1953, as reported in Viduthalai, dated 23-12-1953)

Celebration on the birthday of Mohammad Nabi has been in practice for a long time in this country. The preaching of Mohammad Nabi, all of them, though not acceptable and conformable by one and all, people of many kinds, different characteristics and divisions, are participants in this celebration. The reason for this is, that though several aspects of his preaching are not acceptable to people of differential status, life-style and thought-pattern, some ideals, morals and principles of his are such

as agreeable to all and even unquestionable by any, to whatever status, life-style or thought-pattern they may belong. Also, the Muslim friends of this country, in the matter of spreading and preaching the message of Mohammad Nabi, open-heartedly invite others to participate and give them opportunity to speak; and they are much satisfied hearing them speak in praise of Nabi's teachings.

Any ideal, if considered whether acceptable to people of the whole world and suitable to men of all kinds, despite it being claimed to be so agreeable and reasonable in itself, there would certainly be some who would oppose it. This is but natural. For it is not possible that people of the whole world be of one intention, character and culture. On the other hand there would be differentiation among them. While there could be various reasons for this, differences and contradictions themselves are indeed natural. It is not possible for any ideal that the entire 200 crore people of the world should accept it uniformly.

And again, it cannot be asserted that a single ideal, scheme or reasoning has been devised in such a manner as to suit all times, characters, statuses and peoples. If it is claimed to be so, it is tantamount to be saying that the preacher of such an ideal is a sage who could see through the past, present and future. Besides, do people continue to exist in the same stage as in the past? Does time create people in the same way as in ancient days? One has to think whether traditions, aspirations and mental stages continue unchanged.

Day by day people are changing; the changing times also facilitate this. The conditions, ideas, goals and aspirations of people, some 1000 or 2000 years ago, were different from those of people today. Similarly, people are not in the same stage today as they were some five hundred years ago. This is true of even people of some three hundred, one hundred, why even fifty years ago. People of today are different from those of fifty years ago in all characteristics and spheres. And according to such changed ideas, desires and aspirations, their conduct and activities also are diversified.

Generally speaking life is self-centered. Moreover man makes continuous efforts in the direction of improvement of his own life, security, and comforts and in all other aspects. In the process of increasing his own comforts he also needs to change accordingly. When selfishness goes up in the life of some, in the course of their search for their own exclusive comforts and security they do not care for others and the human society, but create organizations to serve only their comforts. Let it be on one side. Why do I say this? Human life, thought and conduct do not remain fixed, but undergo continuous change according to the different

stages. When we look at it from such a point of view, what one person had said sometime, somewhere in some context cannot be expected to become mandatory for all peoples and all times. That is why I say this.

In any religion, even a single matter considered most serious is not accepted as such by all. Is it even accepted so by people of the same religion? Even if accepted, has it been possible to follow it in practice? We see among many, belonging to and under the discipline of the same religion lack of consensus on even a single most important matter. If one division in any religion upholds a particular thing as very significant another division from the same religion comes forward to oppose it. Such differentiation arises naturally according to the different and particular time-space situation and convenience.

Therefore I say it would be a miraculous thing for a set of principles, all of them to be unquestioned and acceptable uniformly by all. Even if there be a few principles which could be so acceptable to all it is already a big thing. Seen from such a point of view, several aspects of Mohammad Nabi's teachings, principles and activities are indeed unchallengeable, nay, agreeable to and acceptable by all. And this is a great and praiseworthy thing.

Friends, I do not consider Mohammad Nabi, a great soul or someone with superhuman powers. As far as I am concerned, I consider Mohammad Nabi as a special man with all the qualities of a human being and not of a status said to be higher than that. This I make clear. But there are enough ideas from among the important ones of Mohammad Nabi, which are acceptable and could be supported and held up as ideals even by people like us who do not see any divine nature in him and also by those reformists belonging to other religions.

What did he say? God is one and not many. You might ask, 'Mohammad Nabi could have said so, that there is only one God, but what is your opinion?' As far as I am concerned, I say that, Mohammad Nabi is so much better than those who in the name of the divine, labour under thousands of gods. Let people first come to the stage of accepting the principle that many gods is false and one God is true. Beyond this we could consider later. Think how beneficial a teaching is this for our country and people.

What Mohammad Nabi said next was that in human society there is no high and low, discrimination or difference among people and that all of them are equal by birth. This also is very important. Among us also many great men said the same thing. They said many things such as, 'One human kind and one Divine Being'. But they all remained in mere writing and have not come into practice. On the other hand, in Muslim society,

one-God-worship and non-discrimination based on birth among people are in actual practice. This is only as far as they are concerned. That is, though it is said to be operative only among members of their own religion, the Muslims do not display the discrimination and differentiation, which is practiced among non-Muslims though abiding by the same discipline. Today this feeling, that is, how those who follow the teaching of Mohammad Nabi believe in the unity of godhead and practice brotherhood among themselves, the same feeling and idea has begun to appear among us also. Besides, such a feeling has also become fashionable. What is the reason for this? It is because the teaching of Mohammad Nabi is in actual practice.

Next, even in those days, Mohammad Nabi had forcefully condemned idol-worship. On this he was quite insistent: 'Muslims should not worship idols; anyone who does so worship is not a Muslim at all'. To such an extent he condemned idol-worship that he has made his followers also hate it. This also is a highly praiseworthy and appreciable thing, besides being a great teaching for our people to follow, I would say.

Apart from these things, Mohammad Nabi has said one more important thing. Among his teachings, attention is to be paid in particular to this; what he has said is this: 'In whatever I have said, if you have any doubt, investigate the matter using your own reasoning'.

Friends, I am bringing to your mind once again: Mohammad Nabi has said that there is only one God for all of humanity; the entire humanity is of one race; people should not surrender to idol-worship; and that whatever he might have said one ought to investigate it with one's own reasoning.

Finally he also said one other thing: 'I am the last Nabi (Prophet). And after me no prophet will appear'. Whatever you may think of this and whatever may be the conclusion you arrive at, it is true that after him until today, no one has appeared who has articulated principles and teachings superior to his on these matters. To that extent Mohammad Nabi has given high philosophical instructions on all spheres of human-social life. Few hundred years ago some great men appeared and expressed many rare and valuable ideas as far as the economic sphere is concerned. Concerning even that, comrade Jeevanandham has commented that Mohammad Nabi had said on those matters also.[18] That too is a matter of much satisfaction; and besides, no believer has said anything nobler than what Nabi has said.

We ought to register in our mind these matters and principles of Mohammad Nabi and make efforts to follow them. This is our gain from this celebration. Besides, just as the Muslims invite others to participate in their religion-related principles and practices and seek their

appreciation, other religionists also similarly in their own religion-related matters ought to invite other religionists and try to seek their appreciation. Only then a way for progress would emerge.

Appendix-I

God and Religion

The Self-Respect Movement was started with the objective of instilling a sense of self-respect in the people of this country, to bring about equality among all people in society and economy and to unify them. Though it has several other principles, it was not started in order to oppose gods and religions as claimed by our opponents. The Self-Respect Movement really endeavours in transparency to explain why and how the people of our country had lost their self-pride, to assert that the obstacles in their way should be abolished and indeed to abolish such obstacles. In the course of such efforts, if religions, gods or whatever else come in the way as obstacles, the Movement will not hesitate to do away with them also.

In this context it is necessary to understand first, what is it that is being spoken of as religion and what are those beings that are referred to as gods. If it is said that religion is constituted of moral rules for the collective life of the humans then the Self-Respect Movement does not bother about such religions; on the contrary, if necessary the Movement will even assist them. If again it is said that religion came into existence to assist the human soul to reach God, the Movement does not care about those religions either; it will leave men of such opinion and religions to their fate at least for the time being. Because such an affair is about men in their individual capacity, it can be dealt with later. But, if on the other hand, any religion ruins the human-social sense, destroys the feeling of self-dignity among men, divides people by prescribing high and low among them and obstructs common progress and freedom by damaging social unity, the Self-Respect Movement has indeed been struggling to eradicate it. Take for example the hundreds of religions of day-to-day experience. Among them we need not discuss now what are being termed as foreign religions, but take, instead, the Hindu religion named by the so-called Hindus as 'our religion'.

If we Indians are divided into so many groups, what else is the reason but this Hindu religion? If the Hindus in general are divided into so many castes, that too, of high and low as Parppan and Parayan, what else is the reason but this Hindu religion?[19] In this twentieth century, the great learned men of B.A.B.L.s assembled in Chennai yesterday and spoke that annihilation of untouchability, that is, the men of lower caste touching those of the upper caste, is possible only after death and that the removal of caste discrimination is certainly not possible while this birth lasts. And they also have said that the bases for this are the Shasthras and Vedas of the Hindu religion. Therefore under such circumstances, is it possible to destroy untouchability and caste discrimination without doing away with this kind of religion, Shasthras and Vedas? Consider whether until now, the unconverted (particularly to Islam) non-Brahmins, any of them, have got rid of untouchability in their society? And also consider whether the privileges and freedoms available to the Brahmins in social and economic matters are extended to other classes? What other reasons are needed than these for the abolition of such a religion? As soon as the word religion is uttered, a kind of fanaticism springs up instantly; on the other hand, these religious fanatics do not think for a moment, what good that religion does to people and how do they profit from it. Intoxication from such religions is more ruinous than that of liquor. Liquor destroys only him who drinks it, but religion destroys him who merely thinks it.

The religion not only teaches high and low among men in social life but also

prescribes the same high and low in economic life. Has not this religion created one caste for painful, physical toil and another for leisurely enjoyment? For the physical labourers being denied of worldly wealth and gratification and the same monolithically appropriated by indolent and leisurely people, what else is the reason but the religious principles? Those who have devised that the toiling people continue poor and bonded to mere food for stomach, remain low caste and low people and for ever condemned to excruciating physical labour, all in the name of fate, themselves lead care-free lives, continually expand their wealth and control and rule over others; what else than the religion the reason for this? When non-rational living beings - birds, animals, insects and worms do not have caste discrimination, high and low feelings and instinct for enslavement, what is the reason that rational human beings have developed caste discrimination, high and low status and feelings of master-slave?

Is there among donkeys, dogs, monkeys and buffaloes the difference such as paraiah-donkey and parppana-buffalo? For such difference to exist among the humans alone, what else other than the religion responsible? How long has this Hindu religion been in existence? What is the progress achieved in society so far? If the despised castes of the rule of Rama, a divine incarnation, the burning yard Paraiahs and the sale of wives as in the epoch of Harichandra, the ideal of truthfulness, have not disappeared now for about ten thousand years; how could it be said that people progress because of the religion?

Consider how much stupidity the religion instills in men. Would you agree that there is not even a bit of rationality in men when they claim to send rice, cereal, fruit, vegetable and even chappels to the other world for the abatement of hunger and comfort of men who are dead, burnt and reduced to ashes, through the intermediary of the Parppans? I am not here suggesting that parents and other dead people are not to be revered. But to do this, why should one waste resources on the parppan? Why should one fall at his feet, wash them and drink that water? Why should cow dung and urine be mixed and drunk? If this is the religious prescription and principle, I demand to know, shouldn't such a religion be abolished? Marriage, funeral, memorial and other rites are all prescribed so that resources could be swallowed up by the parppans; what else is their benefit?

Do other religionists and people of other countries behave in similar fashion? If we have neither sense nor shame, doesn't that only mean that we have no eyes and ears and that they could only be described as lumps of flesh? What is the use in getting angry with us? For the despicable situation of men today, who is responsible, the religion or the government? I am telling you this, so that you may think.

That indolent and dishonest crowd who in the name of religion exploits the people, nurtures its own stomach and enjoys all kinds of privileges and comforts, does not allow us to reflect on religion and reform it; instead it escapes by pointing its finger at the government - the white people - as the cause of our degradation. This is like the smart thief giving the slip by pointing out to another man, 'there the thief is running'. What I am saying may be strange to some of you. I am explaining these at such length, simply because you may not have thought about these matters before. Therefore consider seriously, why we talk about religion and what sort of religion we talk about; and then follow your own decision.

Let me talk a bit on gods also. In these days of spread of science, it is really uncivilized on our part to keep talking about gods and their pranks. However, since our enemies, having found no other charge to charge us with, are indulging in the malicious propaganda that we are atheists (nastik), we are constrained to talk about the gods also. In the matter of ideas on gods, the Mohammedans and a portion of the Christians have

achieved considerable reforms in comparison to the ancient times of the primitives. They teach that there can be only one God, who is nameless, formless and bereft of all qualities; and to him there is no equal; and that God does well to those of good behaviour and punishes the evil. Of such a God there is no necessity for us to discuss now. Several learned men are of the opinion that such an idea of God is functional to social life; for men could be induced to do good and inhibited from doing evil. And they thereby justify God's existence. Therefore let us take up the thousands of gods prescribed by those who are called the Hindus, particularly the parppanars. Why are there so many gods for the Hindus? How did they come to be in the first place? Apart from the several thousand gods, consider, all what other things also have come to be conceived as gods: cow dung, cow, horse, buffalo, monkey, bandicoot, eagle, crow, snake, tree, plant, stone, sand, metal, paper and several other common things are worshipped as gods. In Benares, two live dogs lie about in a temple. I saw directly that these also are worshipped with regular rituals. Pundits give philosophical explanation for such a conduct. For all these gods are allotted wives, children, concubines, female slaves, prostitutes and food, sleep, intercourse etc. These gods also are said to have marriage, death etc.

If the matter ends with such allotment then it would be tolerable. No, these things are enacted, that is, festivals are organized showing gods indulging in prostitution, visiting female slaves, kidnapping women of other families; and on these festivals several crores of rupees and people's valuable time, initiative and sensitivity are wasted. Think; are these the activities to be engaged in, in this twentieth century? Shouldn't men be ashamed to preach gods of this kind, to preach those *puranas* and *itihasas* narrating gods as indulging in such activities, and we too in the name of the gods to do the same, I ask?

And I also ask, if we say these things, how honest and fair statement it is, to call us atheists? If god has to be, should he be only like this? Would an intelligent man accept such beings as gods? All what we do today for gods - worship, offerings, marriages and other festivals, why do the gods require them? Does any god actually accept them? Making gods as dolls, every year, and for some gods twice or thrice a year we conduct marriages, what is it for? If the god actually requires a wife, shouldn't we ask, what has happened to the last year's marriage? Shouldn't we at least think, whether there has been divorce or separation or elopement or death? Why should there be marriage every year? Why so much money is expended in drum-beating and other ostentations? Do you know which caste men consume the food of the gods' marriage feasts? Why recklessly waste food materials? How many festivals are there, of this kind in a year? And in how many places are these conducted? What has been gained of these till now? In the matter of literacy our people, 95 out of 100 are illiterate; we say our country is the poorest in the world. We also say that a man's average income is less than two annas per day. Do we think then, how much wealth is wasted for our gods of this nature?

How many times worship and offerings are conducted daily for one god? For every worship-offering how many measures of rice, cereal, etc., are made use of? Into whose stomach all these go? If on the one hand proclaiming that people do not have education, occupation and food, and on the other hand wealth is being ruined in this way, which honest man could tolerate? Please think for yourself. For, yearly how many crores of rupees are wasted in *Vaikunda Ekadhasi, Aroodra Dharsanam, Thaippusam, Karthigai Theepam, Thiruppathi kudai, Thiruchendur, Rameswaram?*[19] Expenses on account of transport, time, physical exhaustion, immorality - when all these are added up and considered, I ask whether these gods are beneficial to people or indeed harmful? If these expenses are avoided and efforts are made to divert the wealth to other useful purposes, is it not possible to run the government without tax and the money is saved? If the wealth of

the gods is confiscated and industries and schools are established, will unemployment, illiteracy and foreign exploitation in the name of business last in this country for half a minute? For the purpose of lazy way of life of a particular crowd, should the people behave so foolishly wasting away their hard-earned wealth?

Moreover think a while, how in the name of gods and on account of devotion to them, how stupidly we behave? Dancing with *kavadi*, rolling in the streets in saffron clothes, shaving off one's head, smearing one's self with mud and ash, piercing one's body with wires and knives, bathing in dirty water - do we think what for all these activities?

And again what for, consumable items such as milk, ghee, curd, honey, fruit juice and others, pots and pots of them, are poured over stones and with much satisfaction men watch them run down to the sewage? What for, crores of rupees worth ornaments, silky and shiny clothes, a lakh, ten lakhs and crores worth six or seven storied buildings and towers, gold and silver vehicles are lavished on these gods? Aren't these all public properties? Wasting them all on mere stones, the scheming and indolent parppan fills his stomach and his own kind are made into I.C.S., high court judges and dewans; but the claim however is that all this is in the service of gods. Think for yourself whether such gods need to exist. Would such gods and godly services be acceptable to the Muslims, the Christians or even the rationalists, I demand to know.

When, if at all, would we come to have sense? If I say this, the parppan brands us as atheists. The stupid people, the yes men who eke their livelihood on his words and leftovers raise a hue and cry saying, 'religion is gone, so god also.' If this is so, then acceptance of these gods and such uncivilized and riotous behaviour is to be called theism and otherwise it is atheism? In that case, of the charge of such atheism we are least concerned. We are not frightened of this monster. We are putting forward to you what appears to us and what we believe, that the gods and religion of above description are a dangerous disease and that unless these are done away with, the country and society will never gain progressive knowledge and efficiency....(From a pamphlet titled, *A Confusion Called God*, published in Chidambaram in 1962.)

Appendix-II

The Asian Age: New Delhi, Thursday, 3 June 2004

6 Tamil Nadu dalits turn to Islam by Bhagawan Singh

Chennai, June 2: Alleging discrimination by caste Hindus six dalits have embraced Islam after a feast of biriyani provided by some Muslim preachers at Melmandhai village, near Thoothukudi, about 600 km south of Chennai, according to reports reaching here.

The event on May 23 jolted the Jayalalitha government since it took place within days of the Chief Minister revoking her controversial law banning forced religious conversions.

She did so as part of many sops to win back public support after suffering a rout in the recent Lok Sabha elections. The Hindu Munnani has promptly blamed the government for the Melmandhai conversions, saying they would not have happened if the anti-conversion law was still in place.

About two dozen Muslims from Thanjavur, Theni and Erwadi went to the dalit colony in the village, housing about 150 families, that Sunday evening with biriyani packets and a couple of clerics. Once the food was served, the dalits were treated to a sermon on Islam and six of them came forward to be converted, eyewitnesses said.

Nineteen-year-old Sudhakar, a school dropout and son of a poor mason, was one of them. He says he decided to embrace Islam because the Hindus treated dalits badly. "For instance, the two tea shops owned by caste Hindus humiliate the dalits by serving tea in separate containers while at the third shop, belonging to a Muslim, the dalits are treated as equals."

However the youth in the village insist that they would never ill-treat the dalits though there could be some aberrations among the older illiterates among the caste Hindus.

"They (dalits) are contemplating more conversions but no dates have been fixed. The six who have converted to Islam did so to enhance their social status and not because there was any coercion or allurement from Muslim leaders," said P. Kaladi, the district vice-president of the Dravidar Kazhagam who had encouraged the dalits to convert. Himself a caste Hindu, Mr.Kaladi recalls that DK founder E.V. Ramasamy Periyar had exhorted the dalits at a massive 1925 rally at Vaikkom, Kerala, to convert to Islam if they wanted to be treated as equals. "I am only continuing our late leader's preaching. There is no future for the dalits in Hinduism," Mr. Kaladi said in a phone interview. He however admits that dalits are not ill treated in Melmandhai and there are no social tensions in the village.

Then why did the conversions happen? The dalits in the village struggle for their livelihood as farm labour and with rains failing for the last three years, life has been harder. The government is keen on ensuring that they do not fall easy prey to conversion attempts by unscrupulous elements taking advantage of the withdrawal of the anti-conversion law.

Endnotes

1. There is no systematic interpretative history of Periyar's life, mission and message in the context of colonial developments in Tamil Nadu. However, these following writings are important: S. Saraswati (1994), E.S. Visswanathan (1983), N.K. Mangala Murugesan (undated), Anita Diehl (1978) and the recent V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai (1998).
2. Of Periyar, Ryerson (1958) rightly quotes Clifford Geertz describing him as one of those, "If they did not wholly make up the history of their times....they surely embodied it."(p.85)
3. The image of Periyar as a crude atheist became popular with his statue being set up everywhere in Tamil Nadu with his saying, 'One who believes in God is a fool etc.,' taken out of context. This was done presumably to propagate Periyar's views. Ryerson's conclusion is pertinent: 'Periyar's atheistic convictions are not in doubt, but the results of his movement have been more in the direction of religious reform than in that of abolition. Sriniwas, Singer and Agehananda Bharati are as unaware of this as are Periyar's devoted followers or the Marxists of Tamil Nadu.' (1958:107)
4. Strictly speaking, atheism presumes and negates the God of monotheism, which was not the case with the Indian context in which Periyar was articulating and elaborating his views.
5. Colonial valorization of Brahminical casteism or varna is elaborated with references in G. Aloysius (2002).

6. All the founding fathers of sociology, Durkheim, Marx and Max Weber, were concerned with the social dimension of religion, the structural changes that religion was undergoing in the context of modernity and its continuing role in modern-industrial life. See R. Bocock & K. Thompson (1985).
7. In the wake of modernity, consistent with the overall social transformation, religion too undergoes a split and dichotomous development of fundamentalisation / communalization on the one hand and secularization / democratization on the other. See G. Aloysius (2004).
8. For a simple and straightforward exposition of what constituted 'modern Hinduism' against which the great social reformers took battle, see the writings of Gandhi.
9. From the Western part of the sub-continent, Justice Ranade too had observed: 'There are those amongst us who think that the whole history of the Mohammedan ascendancy should for all practical purposes, be regarded as a period of humiliation and sorrow. Such a view appears to be unsupported by any correct appreciation of the forces which work for the elevation or depression of nations. The influences and restrains of alien domination were calculated to do lasting service in the building up of the strength and character of the people in the directions in which the Indian races were most deficient.' (B.N. Ganguli,1975:61)
10. Issues of self-respect, egalitarianism and the concrete possibility of conversion to another egalitarian religion are not questions merely of history, but contemporary and existential for the caste-oppressed masses. (see Appendix)
11. Different communities of Muslims in Southern India. Ambedkar, perhaps the tallest of the modern Indian leaders, as early as 1935 had declared that though he was born as a Hindu would certainly not die as one.
12. Brahminism for Periyar is a social ideology, upheld by the beliefs and practices of Vedic-Brahminical religion; it prescribes that the natural and normal social order is hierarchical, based on the inner differences to be found in men, which differences are transmitted through heredity, thus creating essentialised social groups known as varna/caste; and such a hierarchical social order is maintained largely but not solely by the agency of the Brahmins who occupy the top position of the hierarchy and for whose benefit it has been envisaged.
13. Hanuman and Vibhishnan, the mythical figures, in the reading of Periyar, represent slavish obedience and following. That the terms Arya and Aryan in the colonial context are racial in connotation has been sufficiently explained and elaborated by almost all modern historians; however at the popular level these terms, the Aryan and the Dravidian meant something more concrete and contemporary. They are critical-political, referring to consciously reconstituted social groups upholding or opposing varna/caste at the present.
14. Locating the antagonism between the Hindus and Muslims at the differential social relations, one non-egalitarian and the other egalitarian, is not unique to Periyar. As early as the eleventh century, Alberuni commented thus: "We Muslims of course, stand entirely on the other side of the question, considering all men as equal, except in piety; and this is the greatest obstacle

which prevents any approach or understanding between the Hindus and Muslims."(1996:Part I,100)

15. The scheme of separate representation for the Muslims was devised under the India Act of 1935.
16. Asian Conference constituting several countries of the continent as members held its first meeting in New Delhi in the year 1946. The Conference collapsed in the early sixties.
17. The reference obviously is to Marx and Engels.
18. The term parppan, in its different variations refers to the Brahmins in somewhat contemptuous manner.
19. Names of popular South Indian festivals.

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